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Identity Without Boundaries: Public Administration's Canon(s) of Integration

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Abstract

It is often charged that the study of public administration lacks boundaries and suffers from an identity crisis. This charge is grounded in a positivist belief in the unity of knowledge. From the perspective of positivists, the study of public administration lacks the epistemological unity that would make it a true science. Regarding public administration as an interdisciplinary study and practice makes it possible, indeed necessary, to include all theories, models, and concepts in use and not just those that are recommended and pursued by positivists. A conceptual map of knowledge integration efforts in public administration illustrates why public administration cannot, and should not be, a traditional academic discipline but rather must be understood as an interdisciplinary study and practice.

Keywords

interdisciplinarity, knowledge integration, identity crisis

> The backwardness of social knowledge is marked in its division into independent and insulated branches of learning. Anthropology, history, sociology, morals, economics, political science, go their own ways without constant and systematized fruitful interaction.
>
> (Dewey, 1927, p. 171)

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> Social Science has accumulated many diverse bodies of knowledge. Each specific parcel is separate, almost insulated from the others.
>
> (Fiske, 1986, p. 61)

Some believe that public administration is a study without boundaries (Streib, Slotkin, & Rivera, 2001, p. 522), that it suffers from an identity crisis (Ostrom, 1974), that its multidisciplinary nature makes it "the Israel of academic disciplines—always squabbling over the precise (and priceless) boundary lines that define our identity" (Rodgers & Rodgers, 2000, p. 436), and that it is "left to feast on the leftovers" of the mono-disciplines (Rodgers & Rodgers, 2000, p. 441). Use of the word *squabbling* conjures up an image of scholars disagreeing on rather petty issues. But there is nothing petty about the questions that surround the identity of the study and practice of public administration.[1] The often heard criticism that the study is not scientific because it lacks boundaries only makes sense if public administration is viewed as a traditional academic discipline that strives for a positivist unity of knowledge. What is less understood or forgotten is that the study also offers a "terminal" professional or practitioner's degree and has an obligation to serve practicing professionals in a fashion similar to applied fields such as law, medicine, business administration, and social work. When the breadth, multidimensionality and multifaceted nature of public administration is taken into account, traditional positivists' criticisms about the field's lack of boundaries are meaningless.

The dominant approach to establishing a traditional discipline's identity, and thus its boundaries, is to achieve knowledge integration through developing epistemologically and methodologically consistent models distinct from other disciplines. Commentaries critical of public administration's lack of boundaries and identity are therefore implicitly biased toward, and misled by, the achievements made by disciplines that enjoy some degree of epistemological and methodological unity, but these critiques display a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of the field.

The study of public administration is characterized by methodological pluralism (Meier, 2005, pp. 664-665) and lack of boundaries, but achieving unity of knowledge is more likely for studies that claim a subject matter not claimed by other disciplines, do not have to be involved in the complicating demands of serving practitioners, and are either purely logical systems (e.g., mathematics) or more empirically grounded (e.g., physics, chemistry). If viewed realistically as something quite different from natural science, public administration must have, and indeed should have, empirical and design components that not only aim at describing what is, but also what ought to be

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(Meier, 2005, p. 655; Wamsley, 1996, p. 358). This is not as simple as it may seem, because knowledge about government is compartmentalized in specializations within public administration and scattered across the social sciences. Hence, knowledge about government cannot and should not be claimed by public administration alone, but the study serves as an umbrella for knowledge about government. Consequently, it not only works with theories and models developed by its own scholars (e.g., Gill & Meier, 2000; O'Toole & Meier, 1999; Simon, 1945/1997), but also borrows and works with theories and models from other studies.

Admittedly, the study of public administration is sometimes celebrated for its theoretical diversity (Frederickson & Smith, 2003) and richness (Wamsley, 1996, p. 366; Wamsley et al., 1990, p .46), for the existence and use of so many different, and sometimes incommensurable, theories and models. However, more often than not this diversity and richness is challenged from the perspective of a positivist definition of *science* as objective, replicable, and noncontextual knowledge. If, however, knowledge is thought of more broadly as divisible into three *branches* (cf. the German *Wissenschaft*;[2] natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities), the concept of *science* encompasses not only positivism but other methods and approaches as well (Mazlish, 1998, p. 234; Raadschelders, 2008). This broader conception of *science* requires that we should not only discuss various theories and models (cf. Frederickson & Smith, 2003) but also provide conceptual maps of these (e.g., Raadschelders, 2004) and then explore under what circumstances, and how, these theories can be connected without losing the interdisciplinary nature of the study of public administration.

The conceptual map of approaches to knowledge integration developed in this article is new to the study and is an effort to make clear that the study of public administration integrates knowledge not by establishing boundaries but by building bridges in various ways (i.e., what I call differentiated integration, see Figures 1 and 2). Setting boundaries not only is artificial but also denies public administration's most important function: knowledge integration to inform government decisions and actions with regard to specific social problems.

Why Public Administration Has No Boundaries

Knowledge boundaries are determined on the basis of

1. Ontology, or the nature of the phenomena that researchers wish to study. Can they be encompassed within a discipline or do they spill across disciplinary boundaries?

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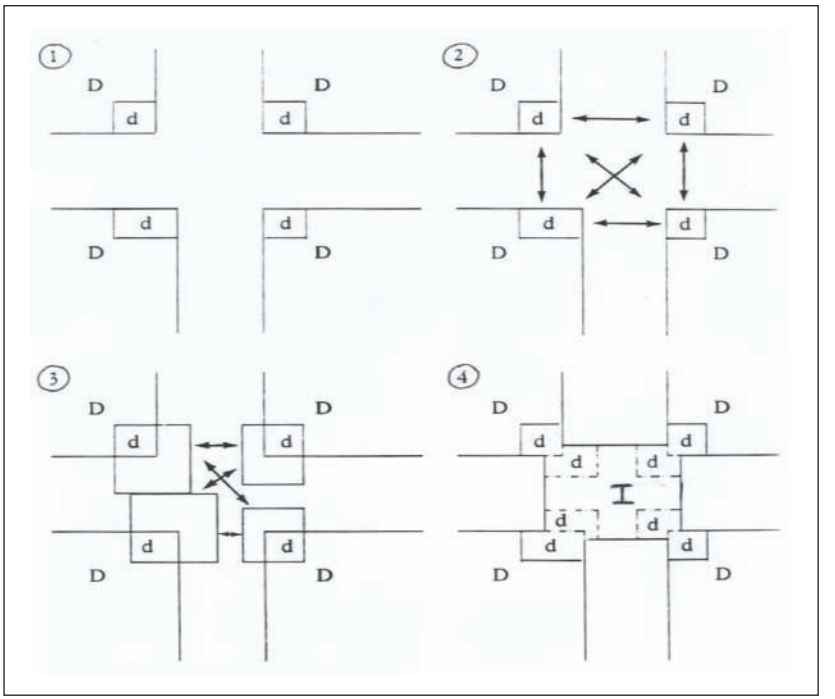

Figure 1. From multidisciplinarity to interdisciplinarity (Adapted from Rutgers, 1987, p. 305).

2. Epistemology, or the justification for knowledge claims
3. Methodology, the methods of analysis that best support those claims

It is also important to recognize that academic disciplines are socially constructed phenomena that are the product of research groups who retroactively define a paradigm. Organizationally, disciplinary boundaries are important because they help to secure sufficient financial and human resources vis-à-vis other entities. Status as a discipline also provides the independence and identity that may result in higher student enrollments. Who defines these boundaries?

In "mature scientific communities," to use Kuhn's phrase, *boundaries*, *identity*, *choice of research topics*, and *quality of research* are almost exclusively determined and evaluated by members of the same scholarly community. By contrast, in the social sciences these four elements are not solely the province of its scholars but also of other social and political actors. The choice of research problems and the quality of its outputs is not only justified

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<table>
<tr><td></td><td colspan="3">---------- Knowledge Integration ----------</td></tr>
<tr><td>Multidisciplinarity</td><td>Approaches in the study of public administration (i.e. one body of knowledge)</td><td>Interdisciplinarity (drawing upon other several bodies of knowledge)</td><td>Disciplinarity</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="4">government studied in variety of disciplines through multiple formal objects, ideas exist about what fits together, but lack theoretical coherence. Example: 'wheels of p.a.' (Stillman, 2005, p.xxii; Raadschelders, 1999, p.292)</td><td>a) one concept to unify the study (e.g., Simon, 1947; Ostrom, 1973; Wamsley & Zald, 1973; Lan & Anders, 2000; Van Braam & Bemelmans, 1986; Debbasch, 1989; Raadschelders, 2003); i.e. first example of differentiated integration</td><td>a) disciplinary lenses (e.g., Rosenbloom & Kravchuck, 2005; Radin, 2002; Martin, 1992; different lenses upon, e.g., oath of office); i.e. third example of differentiated integration</td><td rowspan="4">epistemological and methodological integration. Examples: Simon's bounded rationality of decision making; O'Toole & Meier's management model, 1999; Gill & Meier's methodological manifesto, 2000.</td></tr>
<tr><td>b) from dichotomies to continuums (Harmon, 1995, 2006), i.e. second example of differentiated integration</td><td rowspan="2">b) meta-framework (e.g., Astley & Van de Ven, 1983; Van de Ven & Poole, 1995); i.e. fourth example of differentiated integration</td></tr>
<tr><td>c) mini-paradigms (Golembiewski, 1977)</td></tr>
<tr><td>d) disciplinary matrix (Lan & Anders, 2000)</td><td>c) meta-theory (Aldrich & Ruef, 2006; Katz & Kahn, 1966, p.452); i.e. fifth example of differentiated integration</td></tr>
</table>

Figure 2. Conceptual map of knowledge integration in public administration

in terms of what like-minded colleagues consider important but also "in terms of the socio-political importance of achieving a solution" (Kuhn, 1962/1973, p. 164). This is certainly the case for an interdisciplinary study such as public administration. Kuhn never writes that the social sciences are less mature, but maturity qua "scientificness" does loom large in the minds of many who consider themselves to be positivists.

Boundaries demarcate a discipline, and they are particularly useful when scholars are the prime trustees of a particular body of knowledge. Disciplinary boundaries and identities have been successfully developed in the natural sciences and resulted in breathtaking theories that, in turn, have led to astonishing empirical discoveries. The natural sciences' success can be attributed to scholars successfully narrowing their interests in order to explain some regularities in specific phenomena (Fiske, 1986, p. 74). The nature of the phenomena is such that scientists are able to specify all relevant conditions and parameters under which certain reactions will occur (Secord, 1986, p. 208). Thus, natural scientists have been considerably more successful in developing a *nomological network*, that is, a system of interrelated generalizations (D'Andrade, 1986, p. 28). In the social sciences it is much more difficult, and perhaps impossible, to restrict research to a particular set of objects and to outline *all* ceteris paribus conditions.

The study of public administration does not have a nomological network, but that is not indicative of inferior or even immature scholarship. It has been

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said that the "scientific" standards of the so-called hard sciences have been inappropriately applied in the social sciences (e.g., D'Andrade, 1986, p. 39; Hall, 1989, p. 33; Kaplan, 1964, p. 398; Secord, 1986, p. 199), but let us be clear about why this happened. Some social scientists continue both explicitly and implicitly to compare research in their own study to that of their natural science colleagues and adopt "language" (e.g., the use of the paradigm concept) and ideas about theory and methods (e.g., objectivity, replicability) that do not readily fit the nature of the study of public administration (Henry, Goodsell, Lynn, Stivers, & Wamsley, 2008). Social science is a branch of knowledge marked by the instability, variability, and irregularity of its subject matter (Kaplan, 1964, p. 348).

At least four concerns need to be addressed when considering the nature of the study of public administration. First, the scholarly community that studies government consists of not only public administration scholars and political scientists[3] but academics in just about every other social science. Public administration's boundaries are nibbled at by other social sciences making it not so much "an Israel" as Rodgers and Rodgers might put it (2000, p. 436) but rather a "Poland, defenseless in the face of other fields with territorial designs" (Meier, 2005, p. 659).[4] Also, the boundaries for the study of the public administration are often defined by social and political actors who are recipients (i.e., citizens) or designers (i.e., civil servants, political officeholders, consultants) of government services and policies. Although the social *scientists* within academe can limit their research to questions of "scientific" interest (e.g., Simon), applied scholars and analysts have no choice but to deal with subjects thrust on them by circumstances of the governance process.

Second, the boundaries of the study vary with the degree of government intervention in society. In a night-watch state, it is conceivable that the study focuses mainly on government's role in carrying out the law, and providing only essential services, such as, for example, policing, road maintenance, and food supply. By contrast, consider the situation of government growth since the 1880s (e.g., the emergence and expansion of welfare services) or the current trend toward contracting out government services. This required that the study expanded to include a much wider variety of actors and substantive interests. In light of such changing "boundaries," any effort to establish or maintain boundaries of the study and practice of public administration is futile.[5]

Third, boundaries of public administration will vary with political-administrative culture. For example, the study of public administration in the U.S. shares features with, but is also clearly different from, the various European

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and other traditions (Kickert & Stillman, 1999). Its scholars are highly influenced by the societal environment in which they live. In contrast, the boundaries of physics are shared among physicists across the globe. Although physicists might be influenced by national culture or politics (e.g., the effort to develop nuclear capability), their attention and efforts are first and foremost influenced by the current "frontiers of knowledge."

Fourth, the *subject matter* (Kaplan, 1964, pp. 32, 290) of public administration must be defined in terms of its *knowledge ideals* and its *object of knowledge* (Raadschelders & Rutgers, 1989, pp. 75-76). The knowledge ideal concerns the methods by which knowledge is captured and includes both the *types of knowledge* (i.e., description and/or prescription) and the *form of knowledge* (i.e., quantitative and/or qualitative). The choice of type and form of knowledge depends entirely on, in American parlance, the subject matter of research or, in European parlance, the formal object of research.[6]

Kant distinguished a *material object of knowledge* from a *formal object* of knowledge. The material object of the study of public administration is the ultimate reality of government and governance itself and its interaction with citizens. We cannot, however, know that reality objectively, that is, *independent* of the observer and his/her context.[7] Therefore it is through the formal object (i.e., the specific and formalized way[8] in which the reality about government and its citizens is known and described) that public administration is defined. Consequentially, a formal object does not coincide with the fullness of the material object (Halder, 1975, pp. 807-808; Maritain, 1979, p. 59). Perhaps a distinction should be made between a "first-order formal object" that refers to concepts and theories in and relevant to the study of government and governance as a whole and "second-order formal objects" that concerns theories and concepts in, and relevant to, the various specializations in the study (e.g., budgeting and finance, implementation, policy process, organization theory, public management, human resource management).

The study of public administration encompasses many second-order formal objects. Some of these originate within the study, whereas others originate in traditional disciplines; some of these are general, whereas others are quite specific in nature. Therefore, there is every reason for public administration scholars to define the nature of their study in a manner that is inclusive of any knowledge and insights about the administrative dimension of governance.

The study of public administration should also be based on the assumption that it is a key aspect of governance in general and politics more specifically, that is, a critical part of the process by which hopes, symbols, demands, claims, and promises are translated into authoritative actions, programs, and

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rewards or deprivations. This means that it faces demands for useable knowledge from many sources. By contrast, mathematics and theoretical physics are not only defined by their first-order formal object of study (i.e., they work with concepts and theories relevant to their discipline as a whole as well as to the specializations in their discipline) but they are also defined by their specific *ideal of knowledge* (i.e., quantitative, descriptive, explanatory, predictive). They also have specific methods for pursuing "objective" truth. These methods are based on replication of research at any place and time and claim a preferred, dominant, and even a superior approach to knowledge (i.e., a paradigm in the Kuhnian sense). Scholars of public administration who wish to establish boundaries for their study in the natural science style unwittingly negate the study's fundamental identity as one that is

1. concerned with the organized complexity of government in modern society (Kline, 1995, p. 65) that cannot be captured in any simplification of reality;
2. marked by a variety of "paradigms"[9] and actors (cf. Kuhn, 1962/1973; Burrell & Morgan, 1979) (e.g., functionalists/scientists, postmodernists, critical theorists, hermeneuticists); and
3. faced with demands to solve wicked (cf. Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 160) or complex problems (Fernandes & Simon, 1999).[10]

For these three reasons, the study of public administration is much more permeable to colleagues in the other social sciences and to other actors than is the case in the natural sciences. Because public administration largely studies man-made or artificial phenomena, it would be nonsensical to declare boundaries on the basis of specific formal objects and knowledge ideals as the artificial is a product of negotiation rather than of natural law.

So the nature of public administration's identity is defined by its first-order formal object of study (i.e., government and governance in general as knowable through the lenses of various concepts and theories), which it shares with political science, and its second order of formal objects of study, that is, the specializations. Because public administration is neither defined by one specific ideal of knowledge nor by a homogeneous scholarly community, the traditional use of the term *discipline* does not apply to public administration. Instead we must consider whether public administration is multi- or even interdisciplinary in nature.

Multidisciplinarity is a situation of proto-integration where various studies share an interest in a particular formal object of study but do not necessarily, nor actively, exchange knowledge (Klein, 1990, p. 56; 1996; e.g., Infeld,

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2002). In such a situation there is a potential for substantively linking bodies of knowledge from different studies. The content of public administration as a first-order formal object is defined by, and shared and contested with, political science; the content of its second-order formal objects is contested with research interests in other studies and by a wide range of actors and interests as well.

In the second half of the 20th century, the study of public administration (like the social sciences in general; Kaplan, 1964, pp. 408-409) has been moving toward *interdisciplinarity*, which can be defined as a process through which theories, methodologies, and research questions are selected in a rather eclectic manner from any discipline or specialized focus of study and practice considered relevant to a second-order formal object of research. It represents a conscious effort to *substantively connect* (elements of) different bodies of knowledge.[11] This eclecticism arises from the fact that knowledge integration increasingly arises from problem-driven concerns (Klein, 1990, p. 83). In Figure 1, this development from multi- to interdisciplinarity is graphically depicted. Note that in Stage 4, and at the level of second-order formal objects (d in I = subdiscipline or specialization), active interaction (indicated by dashed lines) is maintained between the various specializations within the interdiscipline of public administration (I) as well as with relevant specializations in various social science disciplines (d in D).

It is important to emphasize that interdisciplinarity refers to a process as well as to a particular substantive interest or problem (Newell, 2006, p. 248). The ultimate test of the quality of interdisciplinary studies is when they result in an understanding of a particular phenomenon that is more comprehensive than what is possible through a disciplinary approach. Some even argue that interdisciplinarity has proven its worth if it actually brings solutions to real-world problems closer and leads to more effective action (Etzioni, 1988, pp. 124-125) or leads to better probing of social problems (Lindblom, 1990).

At the level of individual scholarship, interdisciplinarity is visible in efforts to become acquainted with another field of study to enhance the understanding of the subject matter of research. Thus, public administration scholars have drawn on a wide variety of sources, for example, behavioral psychology (Simon), theology (Gawthrop), constitutional and administrative law (Rohr, Rosenbloom, C. Wise), organizational sociology (O. White, Wamsley), economics (Simon, Lindblom), political science (Meier, O'Toole), political theory (Frederickson, Waldo), history (Stillman, Stivers), philosophy (Cooper, Farmer, Rutgers), and so forth. Interdisciplinarity is also visible in the application of economic theories (see, e.g., Alt, Levi, & Ostrom, 1999) of rational choice, game theory, principal–agent theory and, to a lesser extent,

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of bounded rationality to the study of bureaucracy and public management (Jones, 2003). Efforts to develop systematic inventories of the influence of disciplinary theories and methods on public administration are few and far between. The closest example would be Kettl and Milward's (pp. 47-142) description of the various disciplinary sources of public management (and thus of public administration as well). Interdisciplinarity can also emerge from cooperation between researchers in different disciplines, but can degenerate into a borrowing of concepts and theories that distort and change initial emphases and thus begin to resemble piracy more than cooperation in theory development (Gortner, Nichols, & Ball, 2007, p. 8).

By way of conclusion, it is neither possible nor useful for public administration to claim meaningful boundaries. Does that mean that the pursuit of knowledge integration, desirable in any academic endeavor, is doomed in public administration from the start? As indicated by the definition of interdisciplinarity (see p. 10) it is not, but to answer that question we must see what efforts have been made to solve this boundary and identity crisis so far and what type of efforts have, or could and should be made.

Disciplinary Solutions to Identity Crisis and Their Problems

At the level of first-order formal object solutions, some public administration scholars identify the nature of the "identity crisis" as paradigmatic and seek to enhance the epistemological unity of knowledge for the study as a whole around concepts or theories considered relevant. The best known representative of this approach is Herbert Simon, who strived for a "pure" science of administration. Applied work was not scientific (1947/1966).

Desires for epistemological unity of knowledge have been expressed especially from the late 18th and early 19th century on and have not lost any of their appeal. Efforts toward that objective range from desires to encompass all branches of knowledge (e.g., E. O. Wilson, 1998, pp. 126-127) to efforts focusing on a small body of knowledge (e.g., Sober & Wilson, 1998, p. 331). Some scholars argued that rational choice theory offers the promise of greater theoretical unity across the social sciences (Coleman, 1989, referenced in MacDonald, 2003, p. 561; but see MacDonald's critique of this, p. 560). Shepsle (in Monroe, 1990, p. 42) expressed the hope that rational choice theory would center the effort to develop a core to political science and Moe (2001) argued that rational choice theory will unify political science in the 21st century. One would be hard pressed, however, to make an argument that rational or public choice theory has left a significant and enduring mark in the study of public administration.

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In public administration (and political science) public or rational choice theory is mainly expressed in terms of principal–agent theory (Mitchell, 1988, 1999; Orchard & Stretton, 1997). The pure principal–agent model assumes a one-on-one relationship between a principal (supervisor or a political institution) and an agent (employee or bureaucracy). The agent needs to be supervised, that is, controlled, in order to constrain shirking and information-withholding behavior. In light of reality's complexities, this simple model has been abandoned in the 1990s for one that acknowledges the existence of multiple principals. Public administration studies that discuss and/or reference public choice and/or principal–agent theory seem to focus on (dynamic processes of decision making in) bureaucracy (Meier & Krause, 2003a, pp. 7-10). However, a unifying theory that truly enters the black box of bureaucracy is still sorely missing (Meier & Krause, 2003b, p. 296).

There is one feature of rational/public choice and principal–agent models that confronts the researcher with steep problems, and that is the fact that they often depart from an unspecified "objective reality.". Seldom, if ever, made explicit is that a distinction ought to be made between a broader and a limited definition of objective reality. In its broad understanding, objective reality refers to anything "out there," observable actions, nature, physical structures, as well as beliefs, meanings, and interpretations (i.e., the material object as defined earlier). In a more limited definition, objective reality merely refers to measurable facts and observable actions/responses perceived through concepts and theories, hence a formal object. Meier and O'Toole (2007, p. 793) claim the existence of an objective reality in terms of a formal object, in response to Luton (2007, pp. 527-528), who claims not to know whether an objective reality exists or not (i.e., referring to the material object). Meier and O'Toole on one hand and Luton on the other are not communicating, for neither specifies how they define objective reality. Meier and O'Toole's definition is a bare necessity when we wish to map, model, or correlate actions of individuals and/or institutions on an empirical basis. That is, we must agree that at some level, some degree of value-free empirical description is possible, but the meaning of these actions can only be assessed in terms of personal interpretations, the aggregate of which results in an intersubjective reality (created through consensus, or better, integration-seeking behavior; cf. Follett and Lindblom, see Fry & Raadschelders, 2008, pp. 119-120, and 277) where opinions, actions, and beliefs are subject to moral appraisal and judgment (Harmon, 2006, p. 32). So far, a unifying theory for public administration on the basis of rational/public choice and principal–agent theory is not available, for the simple reason that available methods and conceptualizations operate at the level of second-order formal objects.

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A more modest level of aspiration for unity is proposed by Gill and Meier (2000). An example of a public administration–specific model is O'Toole and Meier's (1999) model of the link between program performance and public management in its organizational environment (in the terminology used earlier: a second-order formal object). They argue that this allows more rigorous conclusions about determinants of good public management. This model has been tested by them and others through a quantitative analysis of several large data sets on Texas school districts spanning the past 15 to 20 years. Their project has generated an impressive number of publications exploring the various components of this model, but that very same work also serves as an example of some of the problems inherent in such a mathematical and quantitative approach to knowledge acquisition.

First, when using quantitative–statistical analysis, the findings can only be about *past* events, situations, and/or perceptions, provide only correlations between variables, and, hopefully, insight into a particular phenomenon as it was manifested in the organization(s) that were the source of the data. But although American school districts are public, they are not necessarily representative of the public sector in the United States, let alone the world.[12] Their hierarchies are generally much flatter than that of large government agencies. They are specific purpose organizations, usually independent (but not isolated) from general-purpose governments (such as municipalities, states). They are monitored by an elected body that is nonpartisan, and their managers (principals and superintendents) supervise a workforce that is much more self-directed (i.e., teachers) than is common in most public organizations.

Second, unity of knowledge through modeling and quantitative–statistical testing raises the challenge that its theoretical quality may be fine but its relevance for the real world is limited because of the assumption that little, if anything, changes over time. In other words, would a data set of management and performance indicators in Texas school districts for the 1987-1992 and the 2007-2012 periods yield the same conclusions as those based on data from the years 1997-2002?[13]

Third, this approach cannot provide universal causal generalizations, because that would require a replication of findings through comparable data sets of both similar and different public organizations in different historical and geographical contexts. Clearly, this would be very difficult, if not impossible. Furthermore, it would seem likely that the broad explanatory power of a model diminishes radically when data are collected from among programs and/or functional fields of significant specificity (e.g., different local government units such as a water plant or a police department, as well as different state and federal agencies). How valuable can findings based on a very

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limited group of public servants and organizations be for the broader science and practice of public management?

Fourth, O'Toole and Meier's formal theory of public management only addresses a small subset of public administration interests (Meier, 2007, p. 8). There is every reason to pursue formal modeling and quantitative-statistical testing in public administration, but the value of such research is generally limited to one type of policy, or one kind of organization, etc. A formal model that encompasses public administration in its entirety is so far inconceivable. Hence, this type of research does not do much for defining the study of public administration as a whole. That being the case, it becomes more difficult to argue that the study of public administration ought to develop only as a "science." To be sure, public administration can be science in the positivist (or empiricist) sense but, at best, at the levels of its specializations.

There are two other limitations to quantitative methods in general. First, the notion that measurement ought to be the basis for analysis. Ideally, any research project should combine both quantitative and qualitative methods and draw inspiration from the four major intellectual traditions in public administration (e.g., practical wisdom, practical experience, scientific knowledge, and relativist perspectives; Raadschelders, 2008) and to see whether different methods and perspectives lead to different conclusions (see O'Toole, 1995). In other words, the main challenge to public administration is not to make all research efforts either quantitative or qualitative but rather to increase as much as possible the simultaneous and complementary use of both quantitative and qualitative methods in individual research projects.

Second, any model of reality can only be used as a guide for the collection of information. It cannot be tested for its own validity (see Note 17). This being so strengthens the argument to use, whenever possible, a variety of methods in the pursuit of understanding a particular social phenomenon.

Scholars working with quantitative-statistical methods are inclined to claim that their analysis is more scientific and rigorous than what is possible through other types of analysis (Brower, Abolafia, & Carr, 2000; Landau, 1972, p. 203) that explore the societal meaning and practical usability of scientific findings: "The theoretical needs for an interdisciplinary field that serves a sociopolitical practice are much different" (Wamsley, 1996, p. 354).

Comprehensive understanding of government requires that we do not solely focus on a particular set of second-order formal objects, because this inevitably leads to compartmentalized knowledge. Instead, comprehensive understanding of government calls for efforts to combine different approaches to explanation and understanding. But how can we deal with the inevitable eclecticism that comes with the interdisciplinarity? The avenue proposed in

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this article is both more and less ambitious than what disciplinary solutions have offered thus far.

To date, the discourse in public administration provides few, if any, reasons to believe that theories and models can be developed that are independent of context and observer biases and thereby provide the basis for a generally accepted theory at some point in the future. The alternative is to examine whether other solutions to the identity crises are more promising. Such an examination must be primarily concerned with integrating fragmented bodies of knowledge through differentiated integration.

Differentiated Integration

Differentiated integration is the effort to connect different sources of knowledge about one particular topic (Rutgers, 1987, p. 305; 1993, p. 299; 1994, p. 295; 1995, p. 81; 2004, p. 263).[14] Before defining it more precisely, we can describe how this works in practice. Let us take the study of the oath of office by way of example. One could study the oath of office within one discipline and then proceed to collect literature on it from within that discipline. However, one could learn more about the oath of office when considering other disciplinary perspectives. For instance, the oath is an expression of loyalty and responsibility in general that calls for the inclusion of psychological and sociological concepts and theories. It can also be regarded as a legal act, binding an individual to "uphold the Constitution" and the law. Hence, a scholar should also collect and study legal literature on it. The oath is also an expression of loyalty to the political system and process, and this invites the use of political science (e.g., political-administrative relations, the supposed politics–administration dichotomy). Any oath of office requires an individual to balance the loyalties to the public at large, to an executive, to a legislature, to the law, etc., with responsibility to self-interest, his or her own conscience, family, and God. Waldo rightly observed that a civil servant serves many masters and that the biggest challenge is to balance external demands with an internal moral compass (Waldo, 1980/2005, pp. 507-508). To properly understand this, philosophical and ethical perspectives are useful as well. It is also a highly symbolic act (an anthropological perspective) that deep down commits an individual to something beyond her or his self-interest (philosophy, theology). Also, it can bring out how and why the use of oath of office varies with culture. Why do most civil servants in the Netherlands and the United States take an oath of office whereas in France only some judges do? (Rohr, 1995)

In the example above, a public administration perspective is not mentioned because public administration is an interdiscipline where any topic

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studied by its scholars ideally includes knowledge sources from other disciplines. However, scholars can limit themselves to public administration literature only. Hence, *differentiated* (literally: not one-sided) integration connects knowledge through (a) organizing the study and its specializations around one or a few concept(s) and through (b) the interdisciplinary study of particular topics and development of meta-frameworks and -theories. This presumes an active exchange of ideas and sharing of knowledge, and that such discourse is as useful for policy and decision makers (cf. Berman, 1974, p. 116), for the public at large (Dewey, 1927, p. 208), as it is for the advancement of comprehensive understanding of government.

Although interdisciplinarity is sometimes regarded as illustrative of amateurism and dilettantism (Dogan, 1996; Finkenthal, 2001, p. 13; Mainzer, 1994), it is actually much more challenging than disciplinarity. Indeed, interdisciplinarity and methodological pluralism are not indicative of identity crisis, inferiority, and dilettantism, but rather, are testimony to the scholarly maturity that public administration has achieved (Fry & Raadschelders, 2008, pp. 343, 363).

Based on the premise that knowledge about government is compartmentalized in the specializations within the study of public administration and fragmented across other disciplines, and based on the claim that this compartmentalization severely limits the development of comprehensive understanding of government, there are at least three obstacles in the way of differentiated integration (see also Raadschelders, 2005).

First, this type of integration is impossible under a narrow definition of science that emphasizes the search for objective truth. But there are significant numbers of public administration scholars who define knowledge more broadly as "branch" (see earlier). Indeed, public administration scholarship narrowly conceived increasingly uses the language of statistics and mathematics, whereas knowledge in the more classic and broader sense also includes judgments, interpretations, and narratives.[15]

Second, substantive coherence may be difficult to achieve in a group. It presupposes that all participants understand the disciplinary background of one another and are familiar with the empirical and normative work in the participating disciplines. But with all due respect to Simon, even the best can only collect and process so much information. This is also the case with individual efforts at differentiated integration.

Finally, knowledge about government is, and should be, relevant to both academicians and practitioners, whether they are specialists or generalists (Henry et al., 2008); however, the study has not only vastly grown but is also fragmenting and subdividing. Scholars and practitioners seem to be moving

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further and further apart into a plethora of academic subfields. Practitioners have formed professional associations that each have separate annual conferences (e.g., city managers, county administrators, budget officers, personnel administrators, planners).

Generally there is also decreasing interest or concern with integration, cohesion, or efforts at over-arching synthesis of these fragments and subfields within the larger field and the relation of that larger field to governance and society's needs. Presthus (1964) presumes that there are new generalists in government who have a specialist's background but develop in the course of a career a deep understanding of the structure and functioning of their organization at large, of its objectives, and of its relation to the needs of society. This new generalist, implicit in the conclusion of Mosher's study (1968, p. 219), is the one who profits most from interdisciplinarity and differentiated integration. This begs the question, though, whether the study of public administration caters to these new generalists (both in academe and in government) who—throughout the 20th century—expressed a need for wisdom and comprehensive understanding of government (e.g., Brownlow, 1934, as quoted in Stillman 1999, pp. 116-117; Bennis & O'Toole, 2005, p. 98; Dimock, 1936, p. 129; Kaplan, 1964, p. 406; Tead in 1935 and Durham in 1940 as quoted in Waldo, 1948/1984, p. 95; Redford, 1961, p. 758; Waldo, 1948/1952/1984; Wilson, 1998, p. 269; and, as far as applied public administration is concerned, Simon, 1947/1966, p. 35).

A Conceptual Map of Knowledge Integration in the Study of Public Administration

In the previous section, differentiated integration was defined and discussed. In this section several types of knowledge integration in and relevant to public administration is presented along a continuum that ranges from multidisciplinarity, via approaches within the study, to interdisciplinarity and disciplinarity (Figure 2).

In the case of multidisciplinarity, no explicit effort is made to develop a substantive connection between kernels of knowledge from different disciplines. "Wheels" of public administration are available that implicitly allow for the inclusion of knowledge from other disciplines, but they provide a conceptual map of public administration not unity of knowledge.

Characteristic of approaches within a discipline is that they focus *on mapping the substantive content of a study itself*. First, there is the notion that the study *can* be centered by selecting a *core concept*. The big problem, of course, is that of *selecting an ultimate concept and formal object or subject*

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matter (Kaplan, 1964, p. 78) that a majority of scholars can agree on. Several concepts have been suggested over the years. For instance: Simon (1947/1966, decisions and decision making), Wamsley and Zald (1973, political economy), Ostrom (1974, association), Debbasch (1989, the state), Van Braam and Bemelmans-Videc (1986, decision making), Lan and Anders (2000, pp. 158-161, publicness), and Raadschelders (2003b, public realm). As for subject matter or formal object, the study of public administration has expanded far beyond its initial focus on organization, management, and leadership, which makes it even more difficult to determine what its boundaries are and what concept best captures the study as a whole.

Second, and much less recognized as a method of integration, is the notion that public administration should move away from a dichotomous presentation of reality and go toward using continuums. It has been said that dichotomous thinking is "the curse of intellectual and scholarly action" (Etzioni, 1988, p. 203; see also Finkenthal, 2001, p. 68) because it inhibits understanding of the context in which social problems unfold and can be solved. With regard to public administration, Harmon persuasively argued that dichotomies, which he calls schismogenic or evil paradoxes (where two principles oppose, ignore, or even reject each other; cf. Simon's proverbs) result in incomplete understanding of reality. In his view, *antinomial* paradoxes (where two opposing principles exist in creative tension with one another, e.g., night and day, two concepts that cannot be understood separately) provide a more complete understanding of reality (Harmon, 1995, p. 7; also 2006, pp. 15-23). Consider the following examples: public–private sector, centralization–decentralization, politics–administration, facts–values, mechanistic–organic organizations, and academics–practitioners. When concept-pairs are perceived as a schismogenic paradox, they invite *either–or* thinking. When such concept-pairs are regarded as antinomial paradoxes they encourage *and–and* thinking and emphasize how both concepts are to be regarded as two sides of the same coin.

Third, Golembiewski argued that the study *of public administration* ought to develop as a family of *miniparadigms* (he mentioned three: traditional, social-psychological, and humanist-systemic miniparadigms) (1977) in the hope that at some time in the future these would blend. There are several problems with this. First, it does not specify a roadmap toward how such blending of miniparadigms could be pursued. Second, it focuses on the internal structure and functioning of public organizations. Third, public administration is full of (mini?)paradigms, not in the Kuhnian sense of a discipline as a whole but in terms of a theoretical pluralism characteristic for the social sciences that best guarantees progress of knowledge (Lakatos, 1970, p. 155).

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Fourth, there is the effort at developing a disciplinary matrix. At first sight, this fits a positivist perspective given the use of the concept of discipline and given the basis in Kuhn's work.[16] Lan and Anders (2000, pp. 158-161) developed a disciplinary matrix for public administration, but when looking at their paradigm matrix it is inconsistent. Their matrix includes political, managerial, judicial, ethical, historical, and integrated approaches (p. 145), that is, a mix of "disciplinary angles" (political science, business administration, law, and history), a topical angle (ethics), and an odd duck (the integrated approach) described as "*not* specifically [identified] with any of the above approaches but *which* regards public administration as an institution that does whatever necessary to keep the government functioning" (p. 158).

Perhaps public administration can only hope to be a disciplinary matrix at best (Raadschelders, 2003a, p. 342). However, considering that the concept of discipline is central to that of disciplinary matrix, it offers neither a solution to the boundary challenge nor to the identity crisis in public administration because it assumes consensus about the identity of the study in an identifiable scholarly community.

With interdisciplinarity, we arrive at consciously incorporating knowledge sources from other disciplines under the umbrella of public administration (see Figure 2) and there are several ways in which this can be done. The first example is the attention to *disciplinary/theoretical lenses*, of which Rosenbloom's political, managerial, and legal lenses on government as a first-order formal object are an excellent example (Rosenbloom & Kravchuck, 2005). White's distinction between three types of research (1986, on positive, interpretative, and critical research) also concerns the first-order formal object. Other examples include Martin (1992, on three approaches to culture studies, i.e., a second-order formal object for public administration), Radin (2002, on policy and political lenses on leadership, a second-order formal object), and Gortner et al. (2007, p. 9, on disciplinary perspectives on organization theory, a second-order formal object).

A second, and definitely more challenging, example is the development of a meta-framework. A *meta-framework* substantively connects theories and concepts from different disciplines around a particular set of theories or a particular topic of study, preempting the compartmentalization of knowledge, which is commonly a consequence of specialization. To be sure, it connects theories and concepts but does not result in epistemological integration. In fact, a meta-framework considers different (theoretical) perspectives as alternative pictures of comparable processes without nullifying any perspective. This definition of meta-framework comes out of two excellent articles that meaningfully discuss and connect six perspectives and debates in

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organization theory (Astley & Van de Ven, 1983, pp. 245-246) and four ideal-typical theories about organizational change and development (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995, pp. 510-511).

Third, the most challenging of interdisciplinary efforts toward knowledge integration is the development of a meta-theory. A *meta-theory* is a theory about theories and examines groups of related theories, may arrive at identifying classes of theories and perhaps even a taxonomy. It is the type of interdisciplinary knowledge integration closest to mono-disciplinary unity of knowledge. Whether meta-theories actually exist is debatable[17] and two examples in publications relevant to public administration will illustrate why. The first is Katz and Kahn's monumental work where they describe "open-system theory [as] rather a *framework*, a *meta-theory*, a model in the broadest sense of that overused term" (1966, p. 452, emphasis added). A second example is Aldrich's and Ruef's (2006) evolutionary approach that overarches different theories about organizational development, but they write that their "evolutionary approach may be described as a *metatheory*, an *overarching framework* that permits comparison and integration of other social scientific theories" (p. 32) and one that hopes to achieve *integrated understanding*, "although perhaps not an *integrated theory*" (pp. 34, emphasis added). Theoretically, a meta-theory may be possible, but given the ambiguous use of the term in the studies of Katz and Kahn and of Aldrich and Ruef it could well be there is little real meta-theory in the social sciences and there certainly is not in public administration.

Concluding Remarks

It appears that Dewey's observation early in the last century has not lost any of its relevance (see mottos at beginning of article). Specialization reigns supreme. This is definitely the case in the study of public administration, which, some claim, suffers from a lack of unifying theory. This is, however, only true when assessing public administration in a positivist or empiricist perspective. In this article public administration is defined as an interdisciplinary study that has to draw on a great variety of theories, models, and concepts in order to capture the complexity of government in society adequately.

Integrating different approaches on a positivist foundation is impossible because attempts at the level of the study as a whole (first-order formal object) are lacking and attempts at the level of specializations (second-order formal objects) are few and far between. Moving beyond a positivist approach to science, thus defining science in a more classic sense as branch of

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knowledge, public administration's boundaries are defined by its first-order formal object (i.e., government and its interaction with stakeholders: the I in model 4 of Figure 1). In Figure 1, four main stages of knowledge integration were presented, and it is through differentiated integration that public administration can serve as a conduit in the effort to fruitfully combine positivist, hermeneutic, and other approaches to the study of government. Full disciplinary integration as presented in the right column of Figure 2 is inconceivable at the level of the study as a whole.

Admittedly, it is not enough to argue that scholars should try and apply different approaches to the study of a particular topic. This article is more than simply another call for interdisciplinarity and for looking across the hedges of the main traditions in public administration research. Hopefully, it outlines the challenges of and opportunities for knowledge integration in the study and, thus, provides an ontological and epistemological basis to the study that was lacking hitherto. I have no illusions that this article will "end" the debates between, say, positivists and hermeneuticists, about what constitutes real science. I do hope, though, that fences can be removed and attempts made not only to take each other's approach(es) seriously but to try and actually work with each other's approaches. Whether this is naïve or visionary, only time will tell.

Notes

1. In the remainder of this article I will use *public administration* when referring to the study and *government* or *field* when referring to practice).
2. The German word *schaft* translates as shaft, stem or stalk; *branch* is a close relative.
3. Clearly, public administration and political science both can claim to study government—thus share a subject matter. However, in the past half century, political science has limited itself increasingly to measurable phenomena (public opinion, elections, and so forth) whereas the study of public administration has expanded its interests since the 1960s far beyond the initial interests in organizational structure, management, and leadership.
4. Ken Meier, a former student of Waldo, is not the first to use that metaphor. Forty years ago, Dwight Waldo wrote, "Someone has said of Political Science that it is 'like Poland, open to invasion from every side. . . . Public Administration certainly has been 'open to invasion' from every side. But the metaphor obscures as much as it reveals. For not only have the invaders usually been welcomed, but often Public Administrationists have invaded other realms, to enlarge their own boundaries or in search of enrichment" (Waldo, 1968, p. 454).
5. How futile is clear when considering how to determine which activities are "inherently governmental." See the Office of Management and Budget's OMB Circular A76, May 29, 2003 (initially 1966, revised 1967, 1979, 1983).

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6. Before proceeding with this, an important point of semantic confusion needs to be clarified. To an American scholar such as Kaplan, *subject matter* is synonymous to the topic studied. European scholars, however, generally use the concepts of object and subject in a more classical and philosophical *sense*. To them the *object* of knowledge is that which is observed or studied (which is what Americans call the subject matter), whereas the *subject* of knowledge is she or he who observes or studies. In traditional philosophy, it was believed that the object of study influences the subject. With regard to social reality, this means that the social environment as perceived by humans influences human behavior (think of the Thomas theorem). Kant inverted this and argued that it is the constitution (i.e., the sensory capabilities) of the individual (i.e., the subject) that affects the way that objects (i.e., in the social environment) are studied.
7. Rene Descartes proposed the dualities of mind–matter, subject–object, and observer–observed, thus assuming objective reality (matter, object, observed). Likewise, Immanuel Kant argued that this objective reality exists independent of us and of our capacity for experience, but unlike Descartes, he held that only in the forms determined by our "bodily apparatus" (i.e., the senses: touch, hearing, taste, smell, eyesight) can we imagine the specific existence of anything. We find this notion already in John Locke's idea that what we can know cannot go beyond our experience.
8. The word *formal* is used as relating to or constituting "logical, epistemological or ontological forms" and "belonging to a formalized system" (*Webster's Third International Dictionary*, 1993, p. 893).
9. On purpose the word *paradigm* is placed between quotation marks. In Kuhn's description of scientific revolutions one dominant paradigm is replaced by another and this sequential development represents progress of science (e.g., from the Ptolemean universe, to Newtonian physics, to post-Einstein physics). In such a sequential development of science, paradigms cannot but be incommensurable. In the social sciences, the concept of "paradigm" is often used, but then in acknowledgement of the simultaneous existence of multiple paradigms each of provide a particular lens on social reality and are mutually exclusive (see, e.g., Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p. 25). Using the paradigm concept in a social science context may induce expectations about the degree to which the social sciences ought to strive for objective knowledge that is acquired independent of the researcher's biases. That is, it may lead to comparisons between the natural and the social sciences, where the latter is (a) judged by standards of the former that are inappropriate to its object of knowledge and (b) forced to debate its knowledge in a natural science framework where it cannot possible compete. With regard to the study of public administration, it is very important to recognize that there are multiple ways in which reality is investigated. To avoid confusion

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about expectations of public administration research, the "paradigm" concept can easily be replaced by "theory" or "framework of reference."

10. "As distinguished from problems in the natural sciences, which are definable and separable and have many solutions that are findable, the problems of governmental planning—and especially those of social or policy planning—are ill-defined: and they rely on elusive political judgment for resolution" (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 160). Fernandes and Simon (1999, pp. 225-226) outline four features of complex problems: intransparency (only knowledge about symptoms is available, only some variables can be directly observed, observer needs to select from among large number of variables), polytely (multiple, interfering goals), situational complexity (complex connection patterns between variables), and time-delayed effects (consequences of actions not always immediate).
11. Dogan (1996, p. 97) defines interdisciplinarity in terms of relations between *whole* disciplines. In his view, political science only maintains connections with sectors of different disciplines and is therefore not interdisciplinary. However, when scholars from different disciplines maintain active relations in terms of exchange and connection of knowledge about a particular first- or (mostly) second-order formal object, there is interdisciplinarity.
12. As is implicitly recognized by Meier, O'Toole, and Goerdel (2006) when observing that "school districts are the most common public organizations in the United States [yet] they have some distinct characteristics. . . . If the findings here can be generalized, they would be applicable to *similar types of organizations* [emphasis added]" (p. 29).
13. That is, any generalization that coincides with a closed range of application (in this example, 1997-2002) does not qualify as a universal statement. See Kaplan (1964, p. 92). See also Corcoran (1993, pp. 102-103) about research findings as expressions of timeless forces rather than as a representation of a specific moment in time.
14. It might be useful to briefly reflect on the concept of differentiated integration. Some of the reviewers suggested that it is a bit of an oxymoron, i.e., a contradiction in terms. But it is only a contradiction when one holds to a positivist idea about knowledge integration.
15. This difference in the conceptualization of science was believed strong enough that the Department of Economics of the University of Notre Dame decided to split in the Fall of 2003 into an orthodox (quantitative) graduate program (Department of Economics and Econometrics) and a heterodox (qualitative) program for undergraduates that focused on, e.g., economic thought, social justice, and public policy (Department of Economics and Policy Studies). Might the same happen in public administration? This author hopes not.
16. Kuhn (1973) initially developed the concept of "paradigm" to describe the nature of a scientific revolution. Later he endorsed Masterman's (1970, pp. 67-74)

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concept of coexisting multiple or sociological paradigms as better than his own, but preferred to speak of *disciplinary matrix* instead because "disciplinary" refers to that which is common in a particular disciplinary community and "matrix" to ordered elements that require individual specification (Kuhn, 1970, p. 271; 1973, p. 183).

17. The German mathematician David Hilbert formulated a program to give mathematics a consistent logical foundation. This program was "concerned with formal deductions rather than with concepts of truth, satisfaction, and validity." It launched the concept of meta-theory into academic parlance. Any hope that such proof would be found was obliterated by Kurt Gödel, who proved that this was an impossible dream through his incompleteness theorem that holds that truth can never be captured entirely within a formal system. See Jennifer Bothamly (2002, pp. 233, 253-254). Applied to, e.g., public administration it is thus impossible to verify or falsify statements about government because it is not possible to determine whether the verifying or falsifying test is true or false (see Miller & Fox, 2007, pp. 18-19).

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